

January 31, 2007 - Rep. Slaughter Speaks on the FY 07 Continuing Resolution

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M. Speaker,

M. Speaker. By direction of the Committee on Rules I, call up House Resolution 116 and ask for its immediate consideration.

For the purpose of debate only, I yield the customary 30 minutes to the gentleman from Washington Mr. Hastings. All time yielded during consideration of the rule is for debate only. I yield myself such time as I consume and ask unanimous consent to revise and extend my remarks.

M. Speaker, H.Res. 116 provides for consideration of H.J.Res. 20, the continuing resolution for fiscal year 2007.

The rule provides one hour of debate equally divided and controlled by the Chairman and ranking minority member of the Committee on Appropriations. The Rule also provides one motion to recommit.

M. Speaker, every Congress has a Constitutional responsibility to be good stewards of the money given to it by the American people.

But the last Congress failed to live up to this duty. Of the eleven appropriations bills it was supposed to pass in 2006, only two were completed. The others were abandoned, left for the incoming Democratic Congress.

My fellow Democrats and I could have approached this responsibility in the way it was approached last year.

But we promised to run this House differently, to run it responsibly - and that is exactly what we intend to do.

We had a mess to clean up, M. Speaker. The budget failures of the past Republican Congress had vastly increased our national debt, but they did more than that. They left agencies, states, and localities in limbo for months concerning their future funding. What's more, we had seen an explosion in earmarks over the last 12 years in Washington - earmarks that had greased the wheels of out-of-control Congressional machinery.

The number of earmarks approved by the House had, according to estimates by even the most conservative of groups, doubled and tripled in recent Congresses. And for every shameful, unjustifiable bridge to nowhere that was exposed and shouted down by the public, many more questionable earmarks slipped through undetected - a few lines here or there in a large bill, mispending the people's money and taking advantage of their trust.

But Democrats have pledged to fundamentally reform the way earmarks are passed into law by this body -

to bring transparency to a process that until recently had been deliberately shrouded in darkness.

The Rules reform package we enacted on the first day of this Congress will shed new and much-needed light on the earmarking process.

It will require the full disclosure of all earmarks proposed by Members of this House. If a project is worth funding, then the Representative requesting it should have no qualms with standing up publicly on its behalf.

But the earmarks in the budget bills left undone by Republicans last Congress never had such standards applied to them. And so, Democrats have decided to rid this CR of all earmarks. It was a difficult decision, and one which we have all had to justify to our constituents back home.

But in the end, it was a necessary step to bring forth a new day in the People's House.

M. Speaker, this bill is not perfect.

Cleaning up the mess we inherited required difficult choices between bad alternatives.

But I am very pleased that despite it all, this legislation does contain increases in funding for critical programs affecting the lives of millions of people at home and around the world.

Spending on veterans' healthcare is increased by 3.6 billion dollars above the 2006 funding level. Spending on Pell Grants is increased by 615.4 million dollars. The NIH is going to receive an addition 619.6 million dollars.

Other increases are going to support public housing, crime and law enforcement, and domestic transportation needs.

This bill even has a global focus, granting an additional 1.3 billion dollars to expand efforts to combat HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis internationally.

M. Speaker, the Minority, I predict, will claim that the closed Rule under which we are debating this bill is a violation of the very spirit of this House, and a rejection of the promises Democrats made last year to open up the legislative process.

Let me be clear about the past record of the House. Since 1997, the House has voted on 75 continuing resolutions, and that all of them - 100 percent - were considered under a closed process with no amendments allowed.

What's more, a third of those continuing resolutions contained substantive policy changes.

In addition to that extensive precedent, the House has already fully debated and considered 8 of the appropriations measures contained here. To do so again would take us all year. And we don't have that luxury, not with the many challenges confronting our nation at this moment in history.

Under the circumstances left for us by the former Majority, we have done the best we could. We have produced a bill that will keep this government functioning, and a bill that, despite its flaws, is still a breath of fresh air compared with how appropriations legislation used to be handled in this Congress.

M. Speaker,

The American people are ready for a new direction in our country, and that is why they have put a new kind of Congress in power. This Congress is going to be defined not just by the way it does business, but by the kind of business it conducts.

This Congress is not going to pass the buck, leaving unfinished business for others to handle, and leaving problems for others to fix.

Democrats are making the tough choices the American people expect us to make, and that they elected us to make.

At the end of the day, that is what real leadership is all about.

I reserve the balance of my time.